

Skepticism by prettyboiiharringrove

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Summary:

Harringrove Halloween Countdown // October 1 — Steve will believe anything so long as he can see it. You give him proof and he'll accept it, but he's not going to take you for your word just because he likes you, not even if you're the love of his life, especially when there's real monsters to worry about.

Skepticism

Steve is *not* a skeptic. He knows things are out there, has seen them, has felt their hot breath on his neck, has felt his thighs burn as he tried to run faster, has bitten back the pain and turned to the numbing adrenaline high as he moved on a broken ankle, desperate for escape, has had their blood splash back in his mouth, has tasted it. He isn't a skeptic, he's just reluctant to embrace fantastical bullshit.

The only reason he agreed to come on this stupid trip is because Billy begged him, and some time away sounded fucking great, but Billy's being a tense prude and they've been bickering seventy percent of the time, so he's starting to think he should have just stayed home. He can't even remember how the current argument started, just knows that Billy's been a shotgun waiting to go off since they left their hotel and set up camp a few days ago. All it took to set him off this time was Steve making a sarcastic comment about finding a 'gaggle of ghouls'.

"If you think it's such horseshit then why did you agree to come?" Billy sounds more frustrated than normal. Usually, he'll just roll his eyes at Steve and laugh off his dismissal, but for whatever reason it seems to be getting under his skin. Maybe it's because they're supposed to be on vacation, and this is supposed to be some life changing adventure or at the very least, some weird form of bonding and trust building, but Steve's tired and irritable and Billy is ready to kill Steve for constantly talking to him like he's a moron.

It's day three, Steve's legs are tired from their hike, his arm is cramping from holding up this stupid video camera that costs almost as much as his last car payment, and he just wants to go back to their campsite and spoon his stupid boyfriend, but Billy's fascination with urban legends is currently deterring his chance at rest and relaxation.

"I don't know, maybe because I don't like the idea of my boyfriend going out into the forest on his own and getting killed."

"If there's nothing out here than I should be fine," Billy huffs, turning his nose up at Steve's concern and continuing down their path.

"I know there's shit out here okay, I've fucking seen it, you know that. I just...you cling onto these stories like they actually mean something and they don't. Fairytales Billy, that's all they are, and you're going to get yourself killed trying to prove your stupid theory. I'm fucking tired of it, it's all bullshit."

Billy turns back to Steve, fingernails digging into his palms as murder and hurt fight for dominance and his crystal blue gaze freezes Steve like the ice its appearance tends to mimic.

"What did you just say to me?" It takes Steve a moment to register the words that came out of his mouth, and now he can't take them back. He goes pale, white as the ghosts Billy's oh so desperate to find. **Bullshit.** The one word Billy has virtually deleted from his vocabulary because he knows it makes Steve's stomach churn, and he's gone and used it against Billy for what? All it does is serve to ruin what could have been a perfectly good vacation. "Shit, I didn't mean—"

"Leave me alone," Billy interrupts, shrugging off the hand Steve places on his shoulder in an attempt to comfort him through his own apology.

"You know I didn't mean it like that, I would never say that shit to you. After what she did you really think I would do that ??" Steve seems offended by the implication, so distracted by it that he almost misses the tears brimming in Billy's eyes.

"The problem isn't that you sound like Nancy," he sighs, looking defeated, and confusion starts to consume Steve's features. "You don't sound like her. You sound like Neil."

Billy chokes on the words and Steve loses his breath with them. It's silent for a moment, and then Billy's walking off and Steve's not so sure he has the right to follow him. He drags his feet to an empty campsite and sits at a table trying to figure out how to fix what he's done.

He watches the footage of their argument six times before he notices

noises behind him. He looks around nervously, notices nothing, and goes to watch it a seventh time. It's a shitty angle because Steve had stopped caring about filming like yesterday, and he didn't think it was important to document their argument for the whole world to see. Honestly, the only reason it was even recorded to begin with was because he was too busy putting his foot in his mouth to even think to make sure he had turned the camera off. The crappy footage doesn't matter because it's not like he's going to show it to anyone. If he was smart, he would delete it. Still, Steve must be a bit of a masochist, because he keeps listening to it, over and over and over, getting more and more upset with himself.

He doesn't know how, but he had truly hurt Billy, could hear it in the way he spoke, and that makes Steve's chest ache. He swallows hard as he hears it once more. *You sound like Neil*. A few times he thinks he hears someone mumbling under their breath, finds himself surprised at the push and pull on his jacket because the wind doesn't feel too terribly strong, but he feels like he's being pushed around or like someone is tugging him in another direction, telling him to get lost. His heart won't stop pounding, but it's easy to dismiss the disturbances as his subconscious telling him to go fix shit with Billy.

Steve's relieved when three hours later Billy plops down next to him; well two hours, fifty four minutes, and thirty-three seconds to be exact, not that he's keeping track it's just his stupid tracking app that Billy made him download for their ghost hunting adventure or whatever the fuck. He's totally not checking the app every five minutes to make sure Billy's still close by. It doesn't help that the tracker won't be able to tell him if he's hurt or fucking dead.

"Hey," he sighs cautiously, eyes staying on the ground in front of him, staring at his and Billy's hiking boots instead of his lover's eyes; he's scared there will still be hurt there.

"My mom used to tell me stories about this place," Billy sighs in lieu of a greeting, sounding almost fond. Steve doesn't dare interrupt, knowing how rare it is for Billy to talk about his mother. He's just happy that Billy is even willing to speak to him at all.

“Ghost stories,” Billy shrugs as if it’s obvious, and Steve finally looks up at him. It’s the first time since they started their trip that Steve has actually really noticed him. There’s this fond sadness lingering in his eyes, a tiredness shown in his disheveled hair and dark circles, a silent desperation that is being held in place by all the tension wound tightly in every joint of Billy’s. “It makes sense really.”

“What does?”

“Why she did it here.”

Steve has absolutely no fucking clue what Billy is talking about. He doesn’t actually know much about Billy’s mom. He knows more than anyone other than Billy and Neil do, just because he’s been there for Billy long enough to have earned his trust with certain things, but when it comes to ghost stories and the things that happened in this forest, he’s clueless.

“Mom killed herself here,” Billy whispers, sounding a little ashamed. Steve wishes he had told him sooner, but he understands why he didn’t. It still sucks, but it also makes so much sense why it was so important that they went to this creepy haunted forest and not the one that’s only an hour from their place. “I mean not right here, I don’t know where she did it, but it was in these woods.”

Steve doesn’t know what to say to that. He’s been rendered speechless quite a few times today. He wishes he had the right words to say, but there’s really nothing to comfort someone whose mother walked into the setting of all their favorite stories and took her own life.

He can tell Billy’s getting choked up and so he tries to think of something to say, but Billy beats him to it.

“My aunt had to write her obituary because dad,” any time Billy thinks of when he was little, of when he was a child still desperate for his father’s love, he calls Neil ‘dad’, and it stings just the same every goddamn time, even after he remembers to correct himself. “Neil refused to acknowledge it. He called her a selfish bitch and even then...even then I understood, ya know? I mean I was a kid, I shouldn’t fucking understand why my mom would want to leave me

—”

“Baby, she didn’t want to leave you...”

“No, I know just, let me finish, okay?”

Steve nods, the sadness in his eyes a mirror reflection of Billy’s own. Steve’s never experienced Billy’s particular form of suffering, but he’s always been able to feel it through him, and it breaks his heart.

“I could understand from the very second I found out what had really happened, why she did it. I felt trapped too. I just, I can’t understand why she left me with him. I know how easy it is to be selfish, okay?”

“You’re not selfish,” Billy can be selfish, but he really isn’t a selfish person, not anymore. When they were younger, maybe, but that was more about survival, Billy didn’t have the time or freedom to care about anyone else’s needs. Now though, Billy was the most selfless person he had ever met when it came to the big picture.

Billy smiles at him, too tired to argue and further insult himself by doing so. He instead just continues, because even though he and Steve have discussed his mother and the pain of losing her before, it’s never been this in depth, and it somehow feels like he’s speaking with her too, like he used to, except there’s less childlike wonder and more honesty. He needs his mother to know how much it hurt to be left with their monster.

“I know how easy it is to choose yourself but I don’t know, I hoped she was different. She knew how evil he was, she knew how much it hurt but she left me with him,” he swallows hard, almost scared to say what he was thinking, like it was too brutal. Without thinking, he lowers his voice to a reluctant whisper. “Sometimes it feels like her leaving me is worse than anything he ever did.”

Steve thinks for a moment that he hears a whimper, something similar to a sound he’ll hear from Billy when he’s hurt himself or his repressed emotions come to the top and boil over. It sounds remarkably similar, except maybe a little more feminine, and he knows it wasn’t Billy because he’s sitting so close to him he can feel his breath. He would notice the sound escaping him. He jots it down

as a trick of the mind and decides to focus on something tangible, like his trembling boyfriend sitting on the log next to him.

Steve scoots a little closer when he notices that Billy's started crying. He pulls him close, arm wrapped tightly around his waist as Billy rests his head on his shoulder. Billy sniffles and it seems to echo, but Steve shakes it off, kisses the top of Billy's head, and waits to see if he has anything more to say.

"That probably sounds so dumb. Like he almost killed me, all she did was give up."

"It's not stupid," Steve argues firmly, because he'll be damned if Billy guilts himself for being upset with his mother for killing herself. Sure, she was suffering and that sucks but she was his fucking mother, she was supposed to protect him, she promised him that she would, and then she left him with Neil.

Steve knows the stinging pain of feeling abandoned; he will never know what it's like to know that sixty percent of the time your dad would probably prefer you dead. He will probably never know what it's like to feel his father's knuckles breaking the skin or his tough boot cracking ribs. He will definitely never know what it's like to have his mother kill herself only two weeks after his ninth birthday, but he knows how lonely and broken and unloved it can make you feel when your parents decide that you're just not worth it.

"It's just, I expected him to be bad, ya know? I knew it could get worse, but she was supposed to protect me, or at least be there, and I...I never saw it coming."

"It's okay to be mad at her, you don't have to forgive her just because she's gone," Billy nods, sniffing. He knows that, but it doesn't make him feel any better. He feels guilty for letting her go, for leaving her in California, for not coming to visit sooner.

"I used to talk to her," he admits, chewing at his lip. He's clearly nervous, terrified Steve will reject or judge him for his confession. "I mean *really* talk to her, I would hear her, and Neil, he tried everything to get me to stop. He tried therapy, he tried hospitals, doctors, beating it out of me. I didn't stop until he broke my jaw and

I couldn't talk to *anyone*, so when you said it was bullshit...”

“Hey, hey it’s not bullshit, baby it’s *not* bullshit,” Steve turns so that he can hold Billy’s face in his big hands, now using his thumbs to wipe the tears falling from Billy’s hope filled eyes.

“It’s stupid, I shouldn’t have make you come all the way out here. Maybe he was right, maybe I am crazy,” Billy’s eyes fall to the ground. If Steve won’t beat him up then he’ll do it himself.

“You’re not crazy. If you say you spoke to her then I believe you.”

“Y-you do?” his gaze falls back to Steve, and he’s clearly shocked. Billy never thought someone would be on his side with this, not when he told them the full truth.

“There are weirder things in the world than me coming to a haunted forest to meet my dead mother-in-law.”

“We’re not married yet,” Billy teases. Steve shrugs, a gesture that rings so loud in Billy’s head he can practically hear Steve saying ‘semantics’; it’s cute, considering Billy’s the one that taught him the fucking word.

“I love you,” Billy’s so enthralled with Steve that he doesn’t notice the soft gentle voice on the wind saying the words in unison with his lover.